DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 479 119 CS 512 323

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TITLE	A Review of the Literature: The Effectiveness of Leveled Reading Groups in Improving Oral Proficiency and Comprehension to First Grade Students.
PUB DATE	2003-05-00
NOTE	25p.; Slightly blurred print may affect reproducibility.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Grade 1; *Instructional Effectiveness; Literature Reviews; Primary Education; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; Self Esteem; *Speech Skills; Teacher Attitudes; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Reading Groups

ABSTRACT

This literature review and study examines information on the effectiveness of leveled reading groups in first grade students with respect to oral proficiency and reading comprehension. It explores whether there is evidence that leveled reading groups increase or decrease student achievement, as well as whether there is evidence that leveled reading groups are harmful to students. The review also discusses what advantages and disadvantages teachers see in the use of leveled reading groups and how some schools decide whether to place students in leveled groups. Four elementary school teachers were interviewed with identical questions while two other elementary teachers and a reading specialist held informal recorded conversations. Consistent with the literature review, analysis suggests that students' academic achievement, confidence, and self-esteem increase with the use of leveled reading groups. Research also shows that it is not harmful to students, as has been previously reported in the research, and that it actually increases self esteem. Research also shows that there are more advantages than disadvantages regarding leveled reading groups. There are also very specific reasons stated in the research as to why some schools choose to, or not to, place students in leveled groups, mainly based on the diversity or lack of diversity in the school population. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/PM)

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Title Page

A Review of the Literature: The Effectiveness of Leveled Reading Groups in Improving Oral Proficiency and Comprehension to First Grade Students

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May 2003

ED 479 119

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Madalienne Peters and Kristian McIntyre for their guidance through the research process. Without their support, encouragement, understanding and patience, this project would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the teachers who agreed to be a part of the interview process, both formally and informally. Their years of experience and abundance of knowledge made this project more interesting and meaningful.

Most importantly, I need to thank my three sons who are the reason and inspiration for my continued quest for knowledge and understanding. Still being young and innocent, they are what motivates me to work in education, hoping to help them and others become productive members of the adult community. Even at their young ages, they have encouraged me to complete this project, knowing that completion means having their mom back again.

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Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to examine information on the effectiveness of leveled reading groups in first grade students with respect to oral proficiency and reading comprehension. The main questions are as follows: (1) Is there evidence that leveled reading groups increase or decrease student achievement? (2) Is there evidence that leveled reading groups are harmful to students?

The sub-questions include: (1) What advantages and disadvantages do teachers find regarding leveled reading groups in first grade? (2) Why do some schools choose to, or not to, place students in leveled groups?

Four elementary school teachers were interviewed with specific and identical questions, as well as two other elementary school teacher and a reading specialist, who held informal recorded conversations, all regarding the subject of this project. Consistent with the literature review, analysis suggests that there is significant evidence that students do indeed increase their level of academic achievement and confidence, among other factors, when leveled reading groups are used. Research also shows that it is not harmful to students, as has been previously reported in the research, and that it actually increases self-esteem.

Regarding the sub-questions, research shows that there are more advantages than disadvantages regarding leveled reading groups. There is also very specific reasons stated in the research as to why some schools choose to, or not to, place students in leveled groups, mainly based on the diversity or lack of diversity in the school population.

Introduction

Teachers and parents have experienced different approaches and strategies used in reading programs at the first grade level. At some schools there is a feeling among grade level teachers that leveled reading groups, also referred to as ability grouping, are not necessary for children to achieve maximum reading oral proficiency as well as comprehension. At other schools teachers are highly committed to leveled reading groups, particularly at the first grade level. This is very interesting and puzzling at the same time. The researcher realized that she was always looking and listening for answers to the many questions that were triggered because of these different philosophies. It became important for her to understand which practices are effective.

Statement of the Problem

Teachers vary in their view of the importance of leveled reading groups in promoting reading fluency and comprehension in first grade students. Effective reading instruction for children at the first grade level is crucial for their future academic success. Educators have strong opinions as to what is the most effective way to teach oral proficiency as well as strong comprehension skills. The question as to whether leveled reading groups increase oral proficiency and comprehension to first grade students continues to be debated among administrators, teachers, and the research community.

Rationale

Ability grouping is one of the most important and controversial elements of school and classroom organization. Leveled reading groups were developed in response to concerns of educators, parents, and national leaders that many of our children were not learning to read. It is believed by most educators that the right to read is every child's birthright. Reading successfully is essential to living productively in today's world, and therefore, an objective of having every child read fluently by the end of third grade and possess the reading skills to succeed in all subject areas is critical. As a result of this philosophy ability groups were developed. However, in order for ability grouping plans to be successful, the following elements are recommended (Slavin, 1986):

- Students should identify primarily with a heterogeneous class. They should be regrouped by ability only when it is particularly important for academic learning.
- Grouping plans should reduce student heterogeneity in the specific skill being taught.
- Grouping plans should allow for frequent reassessment of student placement and for easy reassignment based on student progress.
- Teachers must vary the level and pace of instruction according to student levels of readiness and learning rates in regrouped classes.

Background

Educators wanted to use a reading program with the intention of using a coherent plan of skills development, better assessment, and rich children's

literature. Some educators felt it was more effective if this type of program was done with groups of students at the same ability level. In this way every component, every test, every lesson in the teacher's program was designed at a specific ability level, therefore success at the level would have a better chance of being achieved.

As early as the 1960's studies were done to see how effective leveled reading groups were on first grade students. Two of these studies are discussed below.

In a 1964 study, teachers randomly assigned first grade students and teachers to traditional classes. Students were then assigned to leveled reading groups. They proceeded through nine reading levels and were continually regrouped on the basis of their reading performance. Within each reading class, teachers used traditional basal readers along with a variety of instructional methods. The results of this study supported the efficacy of the leveled reading group theory (Slavin, 1990). After three semesters, reading scores for experimental students on three standardized scales were considerably higher than for control students.

In 1963 a study regrouped students in grades 1 through 3 for reading only, and they remained in heterogeneous classes the rest of the day. Results indicated considerably higher reading achievement (Slavin, 1990). Scores were higher for students at every grade level, but by far the largest difference was reported for first-graders who exceeded earlier first-grade classes.

As a result of these types of studies, several districts and schools across the nation began to use leveled reading groups as part of their daily curriculum. In 1987 a statewide survey of Pennsylvania schools found that approximately 95 percent of first grades used reading groups; 47 percent of classes used some form of homogeneous class grouping in reading, including 23 percent which used regrouping. In current years, the number of classes using leveled reading is increasing, particularly in California where the student population is becoming more and more diverse.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this review is to examine information on the effectiveness of leveled reading groups in first grade reading students with respect to oral proficiency and reading comprehension. Leveled reading groups are selections of students for classes based on differences in ability or achievement. A broader term may be referred to as homogenous grouping.

Research Questions

The following questions formed the framework for the research conducted in this review:

- Is there evidence that leveled reading groups increase oral proficiency and reading comprehension?
- Is there evidence that ability grouping is harmful to students?

The following sub-questions were raised during the course of the review.

- Are there advantages or disadvantages of between-class leveled reading groups at the first grade level?
- Why do some schools choose to or not to ability group their students?

Assumptions

Prior to review and analysis, the researcher had assumptions that she was carrying with her based on her own practice and observations. These consisted of the following ideas. The traditionally applied reading groups within the classroom had a major drawback. While the teacher is working with one group, the others have typically been given workbooks or other seatwork. The value of this seatwork is questionable. This may be particularly true in first grade, where students' lack of independent reading and work skills may make seatwork especially ineffective. By grouping students across classes, this allows teachers to use whole-class instruction in a group all at one reading level. The potential negative social effects of ability grouping is eliminated because of the fact that the regrouping is only for the portion of the school day devoted to reading, so that students identify with a heterogeneous class.

Review of the Literature

During the course of this project, several literature reviews were analyzed. All reviews were studies that focused on leveled reading groups, or ability grouping, either between-class grouping or within-class grouping. Many reflected results of studies that dealt with students on a purely academic basis. Studies were conducted to reflect the amount of academic growth, or lack of growth, when students were taught reading in leveled groups. A further breakdown was

included in some reviews, with groups designated as accelerated, high, middle, low, or children with learning disabilities. There are varying academic outcomes for the several forms of ability grouping that have been studied (Rogers, 1991). Examples of the different forms are tracking, regrouping for specific instruction, cross-grade grouping, between-grade grouping, enrichment pull-out, and within-class grouping. The academic implications of leveled reading groups will be discussed in more detail in the first theme of this section.

Other studies examined the effects, if any, leveled reading groups had on children's self-confidence and self-esteem. These studies focused on the emotional implications that leveled reading groups had on the children. It is clear that the more recent studies differ from the original studies regarding self-esteem of children participating in leveled reading programs. Implications and conclusions drawn from these results will be discussed more thoroughly in the second theme of this section.

In almost all cases, the population make-up of the groups were not brought into the analysis as a factor. However, in both the formal and informal interviews with teachers and reading specialist, di sity was the primary issue raised when the need for leveled reading groups was discussed, as well as the effectiveness of a leveled reading program. Because of the importance that the teachers placed on this topic, the researcher felt that it should be included in the project, and therefore, the third theme in this section will discuss diversity issues regarding leveled reading groups in more detail.

Because it was clear to the researcher that three different topics were raised and discussed during the course of the analysis, the reviews are separated into the three following major themes: (1) academic implications, (2) emotional implications, and (3) diversity considerations.

Major Themes

Academic Implications

The theory in favor of ability grouping is to increase student achievement by reducing the disparity in student ability levels, thus making it possible for teachers to provide instruction that is neither too easy nor too hard for most students (Hollifield, 1987). Ability grouping allows the teacher to increase the pace and raise the level of instruction for high achievers, and to provide more individual attention, repetition, and review for low achievers. High achievers benefit from having to compete with one another, and the low achievers benefit from not having to compete with their higher achieving peers. Thus, all students benefit from this practice.

An argument against ability grouping is that the practice creates classes of low achievers who are deprived of the example and stimulation provided by high achievers. Students who are placed in a low group have low expectations for themselves. However, more current research shows this may not be a result of leveled reading groups, but by the lack of experience of the teacher teaching the leveled groups. Research reports that groups with low performance often receive a lower quality of instruction compared to middle and high performing

students. Therefore, it is critical to the success of leveled reading groups that the teachers are committed to making this program work at all performance levels.

First grade students that have been placed into high, middle, and low ability-based reading groups, and performance was evaluated for accuracy, rate, and fluency, analysis suggested potential benchmarks for first-grade performance (Hoffman, 2000). Further results indicated that this type of reading program seemed particularly supportive of children's subsequent independent reading at various levels.

Students that are assigned to heterogeneous classes for most of the day, but are regrouped between-class according to achievement levels for reading, show signs of increased reading achievement for both the high and low achieving students. However, the level and pace of instruction must be adapted to achievement level.

In the within-class grouping, several small groups work on different materials at rates unique to their needs and abilities, also referred to as differentiated instruction. The positive effects are slightly greater for low-achieving students than for average or high achievers. Regarding the importance of teacher and parent attitudes and approaches to grouping: a sensitive issue of grouping is whether the high-achieving students are needed in the regular classroom to act as role models for other students, and whether this "use" of these students is more important than their own educational needs (Demirsky, 1991). This is used as an argument against between-class leveled groups.

Effective literacy programs involve a wide range of reading and writing activities, all of which are necessary and which support learning in different ways. An essential part of the language arts curriculum involves direct instruction in reading (Pinnell, 1999). Many teachers are beginning to teach reading in small groups. Findings indicate that teaching reading in small groups has several advantages (Gockel, 2002). The learning environment becomes quieter with few distractions. The interactions between teachers and students become more personal. More time for discussion and participation by the students is available. A relationship is built between a teacher and student that builds attention, trust, respect and knowledge of each other. These attributes help maximize the learning experience. This in turn has an effect on both teacher and student attitudes about each other and about learning. When looking at teacher instruction and student achievement, teachers report that they are able to assess students' specific skills in reading and modify instruction according to the needs of that individual. Likewise, teachers are able to give immediate and corrective feedback. But in addition to the guided reading groups, the groups must be leveled in order to achieve maximum academic learning. The combination of the small size and like-ability groups will create an efficient and effective learning environment.

During an effective guided reading session, the readers must be grouped by ability (Burns, 2001). The concept of guided reading means that teachers guide students through materials that are at the same level and used for instruction. A critical foundation in guided reading is that students read materials

at their instructional levels. During a typical lesson, students discuss both the content and the strategies they used to make sense of what is being read. Specific attention is devoted to levels of comprehension, questioning, before-reading strategies, during-reading strategies, and after-reading strategies.

Individual schools and teachers should try different methods and use the ones that are most effective in that setting. It is recommended that schools find alternatives to the use of ability grouped class assignment, such as assigning students to self-contained classes according to general ability or performance level.

In a within-class setting, the usual number of groups for instructional grouping for reading is three. Grouping practices that are appropriate for one class may not meet the needs of another class. Whatever the grouping plan is, it should be remembered that grouping children for reading instruction is a means for facilitating learning—it is not an end in itself (Nelson, 1994).

Grouping within a classroom has limitations. The three-group plan may make the children and their parents conscious of differences in achievement. This can create pressure on children to measure up to their peers. Some teachers may feel that individual differences are no longer there because each group is designed to meet the needs of children at the same ability level. If the teacher uses the same materials with all students, allowing only for a difference in speed with which the groups are expected to read them, the problem of individual needs still remains unsolved. However, when teachers use different materials for differentiated instruction, the amount of teacher preparation of

assignments is greatly increased. Teachers must be willing to expend this extra energy to meet the needs of all the children in their class, or within-class grouping will not be effective.

Much of the effectiveness of grouping within the class depends on the children's understanding of the purpose for which they are assigned to the groups, and on teacher attitudes and expectations towards these children. Many studies have examined teacher attitudes and methods while teaching different groups. These studies often show that the high groups receive the best instruction geared to critical thinking, while the lower groups receive instruction that is less stimulating.

Ability grouping clearly benefits students (Demirsky, 1991). When separating the grouping studies into those designed for all students and those designed specifically for a particular level, the programs designed for all students showed a positive effect on student achievement. The effect was similar for high-, average-, and low-ability groups. The groupings for academically talented students were found to have substantial positive academic effects.

As stated earlier, regarding the importance of adult attitudes and approaches to grouping, one sensitive issue of grouping is whether the high-achieving students are needed in the regular classroom to act as role models for other students, and whether this "use" of these students is more important than their own educational needs. That students constantly make ability comparisons between themselves and others is sometimes used as the rationale for having high-achieving students serve as motivational models for others. While there is

nothing inherently wrong with serving as a positive role model on occasion, it is morally questionable for adults to view any student's primary function as that of role model to others.

Further, the idea that lower ability students will look up to high-achieving students as role modes is highly questionable. Children typically model their behavior after the behavior of other children of similar ability who are coping well with school. Children of low and average ability do not model themselves on fast learners (Schunk, 1987). It appears that "watching someone of similar ability succeed at a task raises the observer's feelings of efficiency and motivates them to try the task".

Research supports the following:

1. Children show positive academic effects from some forms of homogenous grouping. The strongest positive academic effects of ability grouped classes are ones that are specially designed with differentiated curriculum and methods that offer options geared for their ability level.
2. The preponderance of evidence does not support the contention that children are academically harmed by grouping.
3. Students' attitudes toward specific subjects are improved by grouping in those subjects (reading).

Emotional Implications

Ability grouping allows the teacher to increase the pace and raise the level of instruction for high achievers, and to provide more individual attention,

repetition, and review for low achievers, thus increasing self-confidence and self-esteem for high, medium, and low achievers. High achievers benefit from having to compete with one another, and the low achievers benefit from not having to compete with their higher achieving peers.

An argument against ability grouping is that the practice creates classes of low achievers who are deprived of the example and stimulation provided by high achievers. Students who are placed in a low group have low expectations for themselves. Also, research reports that groups with low performance often receive a lower quality of instruction compared to middle and high performing students (Hollifield, 1987). Some researchers have noted that many teachers give nonverbal clues to their students that make it evident that they enjoy teaching the higher groups more than the lower ones, and that they expect less from the lower groups in the way of progress (Eder, 1983) discusses subtle signals children learn that tells them how a teacher feels about working with specific reading groups in their class. With results such as this, conclusions can be made that students have low expectations because the quality of instruction is poor, and these teachers may not have the ability to bring out positive self-images in their teaching environment.

The issues of attitude and self-concept have been addressed in other studies. The findings show that grouping has minor effects and is generally positive (Nelson, 1994). Students who were ability grouped for a specific subject had a better attitude toward that subject, but that grouping did not change attitudes about school in general.

The major criticism of ability grouping is that it will lower the self-esteem of students in low-ability groups. However, it has been determined that, in general, effects of grouping on self-esteem were very small and somewhat dependent upon program type (Demirsky, 1991). Programs with high-average-low groups have a small overall effect on self-esteem, but effects tend to be positive. Research suggests that the labeling may have some transitory impact on self-esteem but that impact may be quickly overshadowed by the effect of the comparison that students makes between themselves and others each day in the classroom. Low-ability students may experience feelings of success and competency when in a classroom with others of like ability, and high-ability students may encounter greater competition for the first time. While the data cannot, in themselves, identify the cause of these findings, the results make it clear that we must reexamine the arguments about self-esteem in light of them.

Diversity Considerations

Most of the literary reviews that were analyzed did not focus or reveal results that were reflective of any particular ethnicity or socio-economic group with regard to the school or class population. However, when interviewing the teachers and reading specialist, the most important consideration in implementing a leveled reading program was diversity issues. It was agreed by all teachers interviewed that both the decision to have or not to have leveled reading programs in their school was decided based on the diversity or lack of diversity in their school population. All teachers agreed that schools with a high percentage of English language learners as well as a high percentage of free or

reduced lunch recipients, usually coming from low income families, decided to use between-class leveled reading groups. They all agree that the academic achievement increased significantly at all levels.

The English language learners were placed in groups where they felt comfortable and could take risks without worrying about the possibility of failure. With the comfort level at a higher level, they acquired the language, and became familiar with letters, sounds, blends, digraphs, word families and sight words at a much faster pace. Their self-confidence and self-esteem greatly increased.

The middle-achievers were taught challenging and interesting strategies as well as reinforcement of the necessary basic drills and reading strategies that beginning readers need to master in the first grade. The competition of the high-achievers was not there, and they were the "stars" in their own right. As with the low-achieving students, particularly the ELLs, self-confidence and self-esteem soared.

The high-achievers were able to participate in literacy circles, explore various reading genres, as well as critical thinking activities. A common positive outcome for the high-achieving students, is that "wait" time was eliminated, and they could work at an accelerated and challenging pace, which is inspiring and motivating for most high achieving students.

Because the between-class leveled reading program is a part of the daily curriculum, labeling of children does not occur. All students go to their reading class and then return to their home room at the designated time. Also, it seems that schools experienced and familiar with leveled reading groups, will often have

experienced teachers work with the lower-achieving students, in order to bring them up to grade level as soon as possible.

It was agreed that successful teachers can create a stimulating environment, individualize the curriculum, and use leveled reading groups; which in turn will allow relaxed unrestricted movement, focus on cultural continuity, and mutual respect and involvement by the teacher and the children. These issues are critical in the success of a culturally diverse classroom.

With regard to schools with very little diversity, primarily Caucasian and high socioeconomic populations, most teachers felt that between-class leveled reading groups were not necessary, and those schools have chosen not to use a leveled reading group program. The teachers feel that in classes that are fairly homogeneous in makeup, teachers can differentiate the instruction and materials enough to meet the needs of the students. Some teachers use within-class grouping, but not necessarily in levels. Groups will perform different activities that result in completing specific objectives. Each group will eventually do all activities and complete all objectives, but at different times. Most teachers interviewed agreed that this program can work, but not in all school environments. However, two teachers felt strongly that even in a school of high socioeconomic makeup and primarily Caucasian, the English language learners, children with learning disabilities, as well as other low achieving children need additional support that can't always be provided in the non-leveled whole class environment. In addition, there are always a number of high achievers that could

benefit from a program that offers them the opportunity to participate in enrichment activities as described earlier.

Research show the benefits of leveled reading groups with respect to all children, regardless of race and socioeconomic placement. It is clear that children's student achievement will increase with a variety of leveled reading programs.

Limitations of the Study

The limitation of this review was the fact that all the teachers interviewed were from one district. Because the student population differs from district to district, this would have an effect on student achievement, individual school and district cultures, teacher morale, as well as each classroom and school environment. It is difficult to compare districts with different populations to the sample district without additional time for research and interviews. Ethnic makeup, socio-economic status, and parent involvement play a huge role in the school's functioning and achievement levels.

Implications for Future Research

The research conducted has implications for future research. The district could begin to track scores of students from schools that use leveled reading groups and compare them to scores of students from schools that do not use leveled reading groups. The sample district could also compare scores from both student groups with other student groups from other districts, with similar ethnic and socioeconomic makeup, as well as groups that are made up of different student populations. To do this, of course, would take several years in

order for the results to be significant, but a study of that depth would be very interesting and telling.

Overall Significance of the Review

This review was created out of concern by the researcher, regarding the most effective way for first graders to improve oral proficiency and comprehension. In the review different studies and expert opinions were described, analyzed, and evaluated to determine the academic, social, and psychological effects of leveled reading groups at the first grade level. Ability groups were designed for a variety of purposes: (1) work with at-risk children to move them closer to grade level; (2) regular whole group instruction to grade level students; (3) grouping for enrichment; and (4) grouping for acceleration. There are varying academic outcomes for the several forms of ability grouping, and the outcomes vary from the effects reported for low, average and high ability learners. Enrichment groups produce substantial academic gains in general achievement, critical thinking, and creativity. Within-class grouping and regrouping for specific instruction options produce substantial academic gains provided the instruction is differentiated. There is also evidence of improvement in both oral proficiency and comprehension when between-class grouping is used. Finally, and very importantly, there is little impact on self-esteem and a moderate gain in attitude toward reading in consistent and flexible leveled reading groups at all ability levels.

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EFF-088 (Rev. 2/2001)